

CONSUMER GUIDE to ELECTRONIC and APPLIANCE REPAIR

*California Department of Consumer Affairs
Bureau of Electronic and Appliance Repair*

Your Rights, Remedies and Resources

Most California households contain electronic equipment and major appliances. In addition to such necessities as refrigerators and ranges, many Californians purchase high-tech electronic equipment like personal computers, video equipment and televisions. Technology is changing rapidly. New products are introduced every year. But even state-of-the-art equipment and appliances can eventually need repairs.

This brochure explains how the California Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Electronic and Appliance Repair (BEAR) protects the public by regulating service dealers and service-contract providers. It also provides tips for consumers seeking repairs, as well as tips on purchasing appliances and electronic equipment.

Products and Services Covered

To protect consumers, the Electronic and Appliance Repair Dealer Registration Law covers electronic equipment and major home appliances normally used or sold for personal, family, household or home-office use.

Specific major home appliances covered for **repair, service or maintenance** include:

- ▶ washers
- ▶ dryers
- ▶ dishwashers
- ▶ trash compactors
- ▶ refrigerators
- ▶ freezers
- ▶ ranges
- ▶ microwave and conventional ovens
- ▶ room air conditioners

Specific electronic products covered for **repair, service or maintenance** include:

- ▶ personal computers
- ▶ televisions
- ▶ radios
- ▶ stereo equipment
- ▶ audio or video recorders or playback equipment
- ▶ video cameras
- ▶ video games
- ▶ telephone answering devices
- ▶ antennas (including satellite equipment)
- ▶ photocopiers
- ▶ fax machines
- ▶ car stereo equipment
- ▶ car anti-theft alarms

Also covered is the **installation** of the following products:

- ▶ car stereo equipment
- ▶ car anti-theft alarms
- ▶ residential antennas (including satellite equipment)

Dos and Don'ts of Electronic and Appliance Repair

Consumers should know what to expect when seeking repairs. The law requires service dealers to:

- ▶ Inform the consumer in writing when a diagnosis fee will be charged and the amount of the charge;
- ▶ Provide a written estimate of the total repair cost to the consumer;
- ▶ Furnish an itemized repair invoice of all labor performed and the parts installed when the repair is complete;
- ▶ Return all replaced parts to the consumer (except those exempted by regulation); and
- ▶ Perform all repairs competently

The electronic and appliance repair dealer law prohibits:

- ▶ False or misleading advertising;
- ▶ Fraud or dishonest dealing;
- ▶ False promises likely to induce the consumer to authorize repairs;
- ▶ Willful departure from accepted trade standards; and
- ▶ Negligence or incompetence in repairs

Service Contracts

The Bureau also has jurisdiction over the sale and administration of service contracts for home appliances and electronic equipment. Although a store salesperson may sell you a service contract, the contracts are often administered by third parties.

Before buying, be sure to fully evaluate the costs and benefits of the service contract, and read the fine print. Compare the coverage to what's provided by the product warranty. Know your rights to cancel the contract. Service contract administrators must be registered with the Bureau. For more details, check out "A Consumer Guide to Service Contracts" online at www.bear.ca.gov or request a copy by calling 1-800-952-5210.

Check for Proper Registration

Each location of every business that repairs or accepts products for repair, or that sells or administers service contracts, is required to be registered with BEAR. Dealers must display the registration in their shops. Consumers can verify current registration, or get a list of registered dealers in their area, online at www.bear.ca.gov.

Registrations are renewed annually. Each subcontractor who performs repairs or installations must also be registered. The Bureau may deny a registration for many reasons, including if information on the application is incomplete or inaccurate, or if there has been a prior criminal action or other disciplinary history that is related to the qualifications or functions of a licensee.

BEAR protects consumers, and protects registered repair dealers from unlawful competition, by enforcing these registration requirements. The Bureau learns about unregistered repair dealers from:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| ▶ Consumer complaints | ▶ Review of telephone directories |
| ▶ Statewide random inspections | ▶ Review of local newspaper advertisements |
| ▶ Anonymous tips | |

When You Need Service or Repairs

- ▶ Get referrals for reputable repair dealers from your family, friends or coworkers
- ▶ Check to see that the dealer has a valid registration issued by the Bureau
- ▶ Get a written estimate for any service or repair BEFORE the work is performed
- ▶ Obtain at least two estimates
- ▶ Find out if a diagnosis fee will be charged if the item is not repaired

If You Have a Problem With a Repair

If a problem develops, try to work it out with the dealer or service technician. If you can't resolve it locally, or if it is a warranty problem, write or call the manufacturer and explain the details of your problem. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the Bureau.

How to File a Consumer Complaint

If you believe a repair dealer has failed to meet professional standards, you can file a complaint with the Bureau. Consumers may call 1-800-952-5210 or visit BEAR's Web site at www.bear.ca.gov to file a complaint online or download a printable complaint form.

BEAR assists and protects consumers in a variety of ways.

Complaint Mediation – The Bureau or Complaint Mediation staff will work with the consumer and the repair dealer, recommend informal adjustments, and attempt to mediate a voluntary settlement of the complaint.

Investigation – In cases involving serious or ongoing violations of the law, undercover investigations are conducted to verify suspected fraud, negligence or incompetence.

Enforcement Action – If a violation has been proven and has caused consumers harm, BEAR uses the following enforcement tools against offending service dealers:

- ▶ Informal warnings
- ▶ Violation notices
- ▶ Administrative citation with fines
- ▶ Office conferences
- ▶ Criminal infractions
- ▶ Criminal prosecution
- ▶ Administrative action against the dealer's registration, including suspension or revocation of the registration, or probation that requires the dealer to meet certain terms and conditions
- ▶ Disconnection of service dealers' business telephones

Purchasing Electronic Equipment & Appliances

Before You Buy

- ▶ Research the product to find the best value for your money;
- ▶ Consider purchasing energy-efficient products bearing the Energy Star® label. For more information, visit www.energystar.gov;
- ▶ Make sure a written warranty is provided that offers reasonable protection. Find out how long the product is covered under the warranty, what parts and services are covered, and what your responsibilities are in order to maintain the warranty;
- ▶ Ask who will perform warranty repairs on the product. *Caution: Don't try to repair the item yourself or take it to an unauthorized repair facility. Doing so can void your warranty;* and
- ▶ If you decide to buy a service contract, find out exactly what it covers

After You Buy

Carefully read the instruction manual and follow its recommendations for use, care, cleaning and maintenance. If you lose your owner's manual, contact the manufacturer for another copy.

You may save yourself a service call by checking these simple items if your product fails to operate:

- ▶ Is the cord plugged in?
- ▶ Is the start control fully in the "on" position?
- ▶ Is there a reset button or some other device that will get the unit back in operation?
- ▶ Are there any loose connections?
- ▶ Is the electric outlet working? Check by trying another outlet.
- ▶ Are all the fuses good, and is the circuit breaker on?

Additional Resources

Attorney General's Office
Public Inquiry and Consumer Information
1-800-952-5225 or 916-322-3360
<http://caag.state.ca.us>

Many of BEAR's registered repair dealers are members of the following organization, which can be a resource for finding reputable businesses or reporting problems.

Better Business Bureau
Check the telephone directory for the nearest office or check for reports on businesses at the BBB Web site
www.bbb.org.

Bureau of Electronic and Appliance Repair (BEAR)
3485 Orange Grove Avenue, North Highlands, CA 95660
1-800-952-5210 or 916-574-2069 www.bear.ca.gov